

**Walking the Line between Vision and Reality:
Creating Spaces for Innovative Collaboration**

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Partnerships in Learning and Civic Engagement – A Model of Innovation at the University of Victoria

PLACE, the working group on *Partnerships in Learning and Civic Engagement* is a collaborative effort and a ‘community of practice’¹ initiated by program staff in the Division of Continuing Studies (DCS) at the University of Victoria. PLACE includes members of the DCS community interested in issues relating to civic engagement, social change, adult and lifelong learning, social justice, sustainability, global citizenship, democracy, and governance along with community-based, action-oriented, and participatory forms of research.

The purpose of PLACE is to develop new approaches to adult learning and collaborative program development and delivery, increase the number of partnerships that the Division is engaged in within its programming, and to work on specific tasks such as researching innovative program approaches and proposing new programs, learning tools and social accountability methods.

PLACE currently involves five members who meet for two hours every second week. The terms of reference for this group identifies three distinct phases of development starting with group building and development; then moving to the identifications of needs, types of programming and funding issues; and finally focussing on the development of program plans and strategies for collaboration.

The realization of our plans has been somewhat different than we had intended at the outset. In this paper, we explore the tension between vision and reality. As you read this paper, you will hear a weaving of personal voices and civic engagement theory². This is our story of walking the line. We hope that some of our experiences and challenges resonate with you.

¹ According to Wenger (2005), “communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly”.

² In this paper and presentation, we wanted to walk the talk of collaboration. We explored using a métissage approach (Chambers and Hasebe-Ludt, 2008) – a braiding of personal stories – to embody this collaborative process. Although we chose to move away from métissage as our sole means of expression, we have retained the personal stories in the indented paragraphs in this paper.

Civic Engagement and Social Change – The Vision which Grounds our Work

In the literature, the term *civic engagement* in relationship to higher education is a vague and often contested notion that in its broadest sense refers to “making a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skill, values and motivation to make that difference” (Ehrlich, 2000, p. vi).

There are a variety of examples of civic engagement on university campuses including service learning programs, community-university partnership projects and other kinds of experiential student learning initiatives. There is evidence of support for the notion of civic engagement within higher education. A lack of shared understanding about what civic engagement is, however, has resulted in confusion about its purpose which in turn has contributed to uneven commitment from universities influenced by both internal and external pressures, and frustration from community groups interested in accessing the resources of higher education for the social good (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Harkavy & Hartley, 2008). According to the literature, the rationale for civic involvement by universities ranges from self-interest, such as maintaining the visual appeal of local neighbourhoods, to beliefs that the university plays a role in community initiatives that support the social good (Maurrasse, 2001).



I see my job as helping to facilitate the shift to a new vision for society. To me, a sustainable society is not just about green jobs, sustainable design and eating locally – although these are all an important part of the underpinnings of sustainability. But sustainability also requires us to live in a way which honours and nurtures our humanness and humanity in a full, rich, rigorous way. A truly sustainable society requires a very different way of being in the world. I think that my job is to assist my community with developing the skills, knowledge and attitudes to embrace this way of being – on a sociological, psychological, philosophical, spiritual, technical and scientific level – so that we are all prepared to be active citizens in a new type of society.

I realize that aspiration sounds very grand, and I know that I am but a very tiny piece of that shift. But it is the ability to make a difference – not only in the state of the world, but in the lives of individuals and communities that keeps me motivated and engaged in my work.



Civic engagement is a new term for me. While I'm still clarifying what it means to me in my role as a program coordinator in Continuing Studies, I understand that it involves making a difference in the community. Making a difference can mean different things to different people. For me it means building capacity in community members so that they feel more confident in their ability to engage in social change initiatives. Initiatives that challenge the status quo, acknowledge privilege, and make space for diverse ways of knowing and being are of particular interest to me as I feel these are at the core of how communities will be able to grow and develop so that all members have a voice and a space in which to contribute to the community.



Civic engagement to me means making a difference in the social, cultural, economic and environmental realms of people and their communities. As a program developer and coordinator in Continuing Studies, I see civic engagement goals and approaches as core to the work we do in community education. I strive to keep it in mind as a guiding objective and approach to my work. I see my role within the Division— whether developing a course, community-based practicum or internship, collaborating with a community on a project or priority, or supporting individuals as they become involved with the university as a learner, speaker, mentor or otherwise— as supporting *means* to the greater *ends* of fostering individual and societal change that improves the lives of people and communities.



Civic engagement is a fundamental principle of PLACE and a part of why we are all drawn to making PLACE an integral part of our work within DCS. Through our lengthy discussions and deliberations about this project we have continued to explore what engagement, collaboration and social change means to us as individuals, professionals, and as part of a team that functions primarily in an institution that often has us working at cross purposes. It is evident that we are all inspired by what we do and what we bring with us to our work as developers and deliverers of adult education. Personally, I see Continuing Studies as an ideal place to connect with our larger communities- to work for civic engagement, to take on collaborative projects which will serve both the needs of the Division as part of the University, as well as our communities.

Civic Engagement at the University of Victoria

Within the university's strategic plan, civic engagement is identified as a priority. The University of Victoria's has adopted Ehrlich's definition for civic engagement in its mission and the University's vision is:

to be a university of choice for outstanding students, faculty and staff from British Columbia, Canada and the world. We aspire to be the Canadian university that best integrates outstanding scholarship, inspired teaching and real-life involvement. *As members of a diverse and dynamic learning community, we challenge one another to become thoughtful, engaged citizens and leaders, prepared to contribute to the betterment of a rapidly changing global society.* [emphasis added] (University of Victoria's Planning and Priorities Committee, 2007)

While mention of civic engagement is largely focused on providing opportunities for experiential learning and civic engagement for learners, the vision statement clearly encourages all members of the UVic community – students, faculty and staff alike – to strive to become engaged citizens committed to improving our society and its citizens. Continuing Education is included in the plan's list of ways in which the University commitment to civic engagement is manifest, along with the areas of community-based research, co-operative education, artistic collaboration, community-based internship and clinical programs, athletic opportunities and knowledge transfer initiatives.

A Civic Engagement Steering Council was recently established as an advisory council reporting to the senior administration of the University. The committee also adopted Ehrlich's definition of civic engagement. The Council's priorities and deliverables for the coming year include:

- Exploring the recommendation that all students will have some form of significant opportunity to connect with the community as part of their academic programs;
- Developing an annual inventory of UVic's civic engagement activities;
- Developing a measure capturing UVic's social and cultural impact on communities of interest (likely requiring external consultation) (Hughes, 2010).

While civic engagement isn't explicitly identified in the Division of Continuing Studies' mission statement or strategic priorities, elements of engagement are included within the Division's strategic plan (Division of Continuing Studies, 2008).

Tensions between Vision and Reality

Although the strategic priorities of Continuing Studies clearly support civic engagement initiatives, the living out of those priorities are not always simple. In our attempts to follow our deeply rooted beliefs in social change and civic engagement, we have found ourselves immersed in realities which pull us off course.



For me, the challenge comes in trying to navigate the territory between the grassroots of social change and civic engagement on one hand, and the academy on the other. How can we make this work a reality while adhering to the often constraining, highly bureaucratic and administratively heavy system? The overarching hierarchical and more traditional structures in which our work is situated is often the tipping point in terms of having the time to dedicate to the projects and programming we would all like to be doing.



After reading the literature relating to issues and practices of university continuing education units across the country, I realized that the current professional oriented structure of our particular unit does not support the development of collaborations between program areas. It seems to me that the focus on the bottom line for each area, a lack of experience in collaborating, and the presence of programming staff with specialized knowledge in a particular subject area supports the development of silos. Little wonder I felt lonely and frustrated about the lack of a shared vision and understanding about collaborative work.



I was so excited, my colleague in the Intercultural Education Training program wanted to work with me on the development of a diversity course that could be available to students in both of our programs. I had been interested in offering this kind of a course since I began working in Continuing Studies and this seemed like a great opportunity not only to develop the course but to collaborate with a colleague and serve the needs of at least two student groups. My colleague had an instructor who could develop the course and facilitate it so we met with her and moved ahead with the development process.

“So, how much should we charge for the course”, I ask. My colleague tells me that we don’t have a choice- the credit course fees are set by the university. “Couldn’t we offer it as a non-credit course”, I suggest. “My students will only take it if they can get credit”, she says while my students will likely not take it if we charge the credit course fee.

We decide to put the fee discussion aside and focus on when we'll offer the course. Typically my students work full time and prefer to take courses over the week end but my colleagues' students are full time undergraduate students looking for courses in the daytime or evenings.

Finally we decide that the barriers will prevent us from working together on this course development and I pursue offering the course on my own.



I was so excited, my colleague in Education was looking at putting together a workshop on diversity for her program. I had also been thinking about putting together a workshop or a series of workshops and had been in discussion with a prospective instructor that would be really interesting to work with in this capacity. So, when this opportunity presented itself, I thought it would be a perfect way to work together.

Then we met to discuss the finer details of what we were both looking for- first was the length of the course and what would work best for our students. I was imagining a workshop to be a non credit, half day or an evening event. However, in order for the workshop to work for my colleague it needed to fit into the parameters of her accredited program, which required it to be much longer. First barrier. So, I thought we could lengthen the workshop into a credit course, which would require 36 contact hours. We talked about having two parts, perhaps a blended learning model, half on line and half face to face run like a workshop. Second barrier.

Then there was the cost and budgeting, third barrier, the marketing, fourth barrier, the overlapping with courses we already run in our program. We met a couple of times and eventually came to the conclusion that this would require a lot more time and effort than either of us had to spare.

"Hmmm..... maybe you should just go ahead and put something together on your own."



Woodwynn Farms, a 93 acre piece of farmland in Central Saanich, was purchased by the Society for Homefulness in 2009 with the intent of creating Woodwynn Therapeutic Community. The vision is to provide a space of transition for people who

find themselves on the streets of Victoria with the eventual goal of reintegrating into society, and to do so through the development and maintenance of a sustainable, organic mixed-use farm.

I loved the idea of meeting both environmental and social needs and could see possibilities for Continuing Studies programming. There was the potential to support an important community initiative, meet the university's goal of civic engagement, provide environmental training for clients of Woodwynn and engage in the collaborative, inter-unit programming which many of us had been craving. In discussions with the Executive Director of Woodwynn, it quickly became obvious that the needs and opportunities Woodwynn presented would extend beyond Continuing Studies to cross-faculty and cross-function initiatives.

But how do we make this partnership with Woodwynn happen? The challenges which Woodwynn faces are immediate. The timeline is short. Between busy schedules and the need to get the right players at the table, it took six months to simply set up the first cross-faculty meeting about this initiative at the university. Woodwynn staff required a single point of contact with the University to simplify lines of communication, and needed to keep bureaucracy and paperwork to a minimum so that they could focus on the task at hand. With multiple interests (research, co-op, experiential education, community education, practica projects) and multiple departments (social work, environmental studies, geography, nursing, business), how could we provide a streamlined approach to communication with the University?

How could we all work together? Although there seemed to be a genuine interest in this collaboration, how do we tame the beast of the university structure to provide coordination of such a complex project? How do we walk gingerly and respectfully with colleagues whose interests and perspectives are not familiar, and whose goals differ, and how do we do so in a timely manner? What is the role of Continuing Studies in this venture? As the Division within the university which is specifically mandated to work with audiences which are beyond the campus confines, does our role go beyond community education to providing a coordination role for civic engagement within the university? These are just some of the challenges which we face in attempting to find a role as a community partner within Continuing Studies.



“Cost recovery- what’s that”, I naively ask my first day on the job in Continuing Studies. “It’s like you’re running your own small business”, my predecessor tells me,

“you need to generate revenue.” “How much is enough”, I ask and “who decides?” But no one seems to be able (or willing) to answer my questions. “You decide that”, I’m told, “it’s up to you.” Feeling very much like a fish out of water, I grasp for some resource that will help me understand how much money I need to make. It occurs to me that there are other program coordinators in the Division- maybe they can help me. “15%”, “no, it’s 20%”, “well, it depends”, I’m not sure”, “it’s really up to you...”

I’m told that educating adults is what makes the Division unique within the university but I don’t see that we’re held accountable for this...



A Day in the Life... (My Internal Dialogue)

“Woke up, got out of bed, dragged a comb across my head.... Oh, but before that I quickly check my email to see what fires may need dousing right away. Not a great habit to get into but one that has taken hold as I like the time between waking and getting to work to be mulling over solutions and answers to pressing needs.

So, I arrive at work and sit down to my email. I have a list of things to do, which always includes some exciting new projects or people to connect with.... But email first. No, maybe I should attend to the blinking phone messages... ok, phone first. Then email. I have 5 distance courses running, an on-campus course, practicum students to meet and check up on, 5 distance courses to prepare for and a whole bunch of student inquiries ranging from those who I can see are serious about the program and those who are sure to be time suckers! (did I really say that?)

Wow, is it really 11:30? I’m starting to get hungry. And I’m also trying to fit a walk in so that I can attempt to find the ‘work-life balance’ that is today’s workplace new buzz word. Hmmmm. How will I make it all work? I have a meeting at 1pm to review policies and procedures of the registrar’s office, a meeting with an instructor at 2. And by then, a whole new set of emails to attend to.

And how about that to do list..... oh, maybe tomorrow.

Walking the Line between Vision and Reality

We have all come to our roles in Continuing Studies with a desire to engage with the community and motivated by a desire to create social change. As we have immersed in the world of

Continuing Studies, we see such potential for this work to take root. Yet, we simultaneously experience some of the challenges which we have described above. We both respect the realities of the complex system in which Continuing Studies operates and yet are determined to hold onto our dreams and aspirations to support the community and engage in work that we find meaningful and relevant.

Although these tensions sometimes involve us in internal tugs of war, when we can rise above those struggles, our goal is to move from either-or to both-and approaches. We would like to bring a civic engagement lens to the work that we do and to the identity of Continuing Studies. We hope that civic engagement, social change and community partnerships will become part of the conversation throughout Continuing Studies, bridging subject areas and at the same table with discussions about cost recovery.

We recognize that what we are suggesting is, in fact, a culture change – a shift in the current vision of Continuing Studies. And we recognize that culture change is fraught with challenges. The way that we have chosen to take the first baby steps towards this shift, is through the development of a community of practice known of as PLACE - *Partnerships in Learning and Civic Engagement*.



I am fortunate to work in a program area where the educational programs we offer and the communities and individuals we work with are focused heavily on community well-being and sustainability. Exploring current theories, models, strategies and approaches for civic engagement was of great personal interest to me. As well, I was even more interested in exploring these areas in a collaborative manner with a group of colleagues that inspired me, and that I could potentially get to know better and learn from as a result. I have always valued the model of a learning organization. PLACE presented an opportunity to learn and practice elements of workplace-based learning, serving individual and organizational goals and objectives, and providing my colleagues and I with opportunities to identify our own assets and strengths as well as develop new and innovative approaches to our practice. Underpinning it all was a desire to improve the quality of my workplace, worklife and the outcomes of my work (aka. civic engagement, making a difference for individuals and their communities).



I came to PLACE because I was hungry for a depth of discussion and interaction that couldn't and wasn't happening in my day to day job. But I also came with a question – if we genuinely believe in a collaborative approach, how do we enter into collaboration with people who are not wanting that respectful openness, who seek power or are afraid of the uncertainty which the tangles of collaboration provide?

That was a year ago. Since then I have been humbled as I have seen my own shortcomings in collaboration even when I enter groups where there is genuine interest in partnership, a relative degree of safety and trust, and mutual respect among group members. I still wonder about how to bring a collaborative approach to situations where there are people at the table who don't share my fundamental belief in the value of collaboration or who haven't experienced the sense of relief that comes with deep listening and reflection. But I also wonder if we, as a society, are socialized in ways that make collaboration an impossibility.



As I began my Masters in Social, Cultural and Foundational Studies (Faculty of Education), I became aware that my job did not include opportunities to engage in my growing interest in social change, connecting with community, and collaboration with my program coordinator colleagues in the Division of Continuing Studies. In PLACE, I saw the potential for these things to occur. I was excited to connect with like-minded colleagues who were also interested in working together in different ways in order to build community, create models of collaboration inside the Division and within the larger community, and to support my own personal and professional growth. I'm increasingly interested in the preconditions necessary for successful collaborative initiatives to develop and thrive.



I discovered there were others with similar experiences and beliefs who believe there is much that continuing education can contribute to society beyond the development of professional and general interest programs, and who were willing to spend time identifying a shared vision and discussing what it means to be an adult educator in 2010. Certainly, this theme is evident in the continuing education literature. Many have commented on the tensions between the historical social purpose orientation of the field and the current focus on vocational programming and have called for a

return to our roots. Is it time for a new model of organization within our practice? Is PLACE a starting point for change?



I am drawn to PLACE because I believe in the principles that it encompasses- engaging with my colleagues in meaningful discussions about collaboration, engagement and meaning-making. I strongly believe that through relationship building, community asset mapping, an integration of social indicators and connecting with like minded people will benefit both the division and our programs. Providing learning opportunities which embrace the ‘non-traditional’ and which engage learners in a variety of ways for example- experiential and service learning initiatives will hopefully lead to more engagement within our communities.

PLACE – From Vision to Practice

In order to meet our goals of civic engagement and social change within the context of Continuing Studies, we have identified three initial projects on which to focus.

Social Indicators

Many continuing studies units struggle to strike a balance between revenue generation and other competing priorities, like civic engagement. While reflecting on the value of our work to the Division, PLACE group members have questioned the potential for this value to extend beyond the financial accountability that seems to be the primary measure of success. In order to honour and measure the value of other aspects of our work, PLACE members have initiated some research into subjective social indicators of success- instruments for the regular observation and analysis of social change- that we think the Division may be able to use in addition to the financial ones we are currently focused on.

Woodwynn Farms

The Woodwynn Farms partnership, discussed earlier, highlights the potential to work collaboratively across subject area specializations, as well as to provide Continuing Studies staff with an opportunity to engage in a real-world social change initiative. To date, the PLACE team has been involved in this project in a peripheral way. As the initiative takes hold within the university, PLACE is ideally situated to help define Continuing Studies role in university-wide civic engagement activities, as well as being the logical place for cross-unit programming collaborations to take hold.

Community Mapping

One of the strategic priorities identified by the DCS in the current three year plan relates to the Division's commitment to the social, cultural and economic development of our region. Specifically, the Division is committed to building: "our understanding of current and potential DCS/community relationships, as well as any overlaps, gaps and potential synergies, through a community-mapping process" (Division of Continuing Studies, 2008).

The PLACE working group has been approved to support the Division in this area through undertaking a community mapping process. Developing and undertaking a community mapping process will assist the Division to identify the strengths, resources, connections and potential for program development and enhancement within Continuing Studies, the university, and our communities. The initiative will assist with identifying our assets, shared values and goals amongst ourselves and our communities. Through this process, PLACE working group members and other Divisional staff engaged with the process will develop our own individual and shared knowledge and skills in this area and foster new internal and external relationships as a result of the process. The project will engage members of the Division and encourage those interested in the process and outcomes to be actively involved.

Taking an asset-based, capacity-focused approach, we anticipate the following benefits for participants, Units and the Division:

- We will build our understanding of community mapping as a tool for relationship building, community and program development.
- We will increase our awareness and appreciation of the assets that exist within our work teams.
- Results will provide insights for the development of relationships, programs, strategies and activities based on the capacities, skills and assets of the Division, the University and the community
- We will acquire new skills and approaches to community mapping and facilitation.
- New relationships, collaborations and partnerships -- both between individuals and teams within the Division, as well as externally into the University and outside communities, will take root.
- The process will serve to support organizational development as well as strategic and program planning on a number of levels.

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Through these projects, the current members of the Partnership in Learning and Civic Engagement hope to increase the dialogue about social change among our colleagues within the Division of Continuing Studies. In addition, we want to enhance our participation in our community in ways which help to foster social change and enable authentic collaboration with our partners within the university and beyond.

We realize that these goals do not come without obstacles. As we walk the line between vision and reality, we hope to honestly confront and document these challenges. We welcome the opportunities for dialogue with our colleagues at other post-secondary institutions across the country in order to find ways to collectively reinvigorate our commitment to social change and civic engagement while meeting the real demands of working in Continuing Studies.

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